Baldwin on Baldwin: James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Analyzed through His Literary Criticism

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ジェームズ・ボールドウィンの『山に登りて告げよ』を彼の文芸批評を通して分析する

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要　旨

ジェームズ・ボールドウィンは、アメリカの文学史に大きな足跡を残したエッセイストの一人であり、彼の自伝的処女小説『山に登りて告げよ』はアメリカ文学の傑作である。最近のブラック・ライヴズ・マター運動による抗議活動は、人種問題、性、ジェンダー、宗教、アイデンティティーなどをテーマにしたボールドウィンの著作が、いかに時代に先駆けたものであったかを示している。しかし、なぜ、そしてどのようにしてボールドウィンは今日の文学界にも多大な影響を与える存在であり続けているのだろうか。この問いに答えるためには、ボールドウィンの作家としての生い立ちを考察し、彼の作品を現代的視点から分析することが求められる。本論文では、著者が活躍した時代背景について簡単に触れた後、ボールドウィンの代表作『山に登りて告げよ』を、彼のエッセイ集『アメリカの息子のノート』の中で自身が表現する文芸評論の視点から分析する。さらに、ボールドウィンの文学観がどのように自身の作品に反映されているか、また彼の処女作における限界と意義について考察する。この分析から、ボールドウィンの作品の本質に迫り、執筆に対する自身の見解、そして彼のフィクションとノンフィクション作品における差異を明らかにする。

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1. Introduction

James Baldwin is considered to be one of the most influential essayists in American history, as stated by Harold Bloom in the introduction to the monography dedicated to him (Bloom 1). His first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is regarded as a masterpiece of American literature. His writings, touching on the subjects of racial issues, sexuality, gender, religion, and identity, are still relevant today as they were back in his days, as proven by the widespread, racially connoted social unrests in America, and in the rest of the world. Baldwin's works are still significant to this day, and are often quoted or cited by social activists. The author's relevance is shown, for example, by the article "Tweets of a Native Son," which focuses on bringing "large-scale social media data and computational methods to bear on Baldwin's twenty-first-century remediation, recirculation, and reimagination." (Walsh 533)

Lamentably, his first novel is widely considered to be his best work; his later works were almost disregarded by the critics, particularly after feminist criticism came to the forefront in the 1970s and 1980s (Tyson 117-118), and African American women such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison appeared on the literary scene, introducing post-modern approaches to literature and to the subject of racial relationships that were going to reshape our way of thinking about them (Westenfeld). In the changing atmosphere pervading the intellectual landscape during those years, Baldwin's realist, conservative styles of writing were almost anachronistic, and critics are divided in their evaluation of Baldwin as a novelist (Kauffman 5).

But why and how is Baldwin still relevant today? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider the contexts and backgrounds that shaped Baldwin as a writer, and also to analyze his works from contemporary perspectives.

James Baldwin first essays, collected in *Notes of a Native Son*, are famous for the critiques directed to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Richard Wright. They also contain the young author's views on literature. In the article, I will analyze Baldwin's first and best known novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, through the lens of the literary criticism he expressed in his early essays. For the purpose of this article, I will limit the scope of my research to the comparison between Baldwin's critical works and his fictional ones. Although the result could be simplistic, it should help frame Baldwin works, his views on writing, and the possible differences between his fictions and his non-fictions. Moreover, I consider autobiographical information on Baldwin's life and experience as central to understanding the opinions he expressed in his essays.

2. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Notes of a Native Son*

2.1. The Harlem Setting

Baldwin grew up in dire conditions in Harlem during the 1930s, and, after graduating from high school, he had to work odd jobs to help provide for his family, putting his education on hold (Kupier). Baldwin's stepfather died when the author was nineteen: he recalls the circumstances of his funeral, on the background of the Harlem riot of 1943 in the essay "*Notes of a Native Son*," contained in the 1955 collection of nonfiction with the same title (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 63-84). Harlem, its poverty, violence and segregation are central to many of his works, and he addresses them directly in his essays.

Harlem is the main topic of not only "Notes of a Native Son" and "The Harlem Ghetto", from the collection *Notes of a Native Son*; but also of various articles contained in Nobody Knows My Name, such as "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: a Letter From Harlem," and it is central to Baldwin's masterpiece in non-fiction, *The Fire Next Time*.

It is also the crucial setting of many of Baldwin's short stories, such as "Sonny's Blues" and "The Rockpile", both published in the collection *Going To Meet the Man*; and of his later novel *If Beale Street Could Talk.*

In the first half of the twentieth century, Harlem was house to a flourishing artistic scene, known as the Harlem Renaissance, populated by many now famous African American writers and musicians. Among them are the renowned poet Langston Hughes, the novelist Zora Neale Hurston, and jazz musicians like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

Baldwin started publishing film reviews in the 1940s and, through the help of Richard Wright, who evaluated him highly, he was granted two scholarships, which helped him escape the ghetto and settle in France in 1948 (Leeming 56-57). This geographical separation from his native environment provided him the detachment he needed in order to analyze the American society in which he grew up.

The roots of the American Civil Rights Movement date back to the 1935 Harlem riot, which is considered to be the end of the Harlem Renaissance. The Civil Rights Movement grew in resonance over the years, and finally came to the forefront of national politics in 1955 after the arrest of Rosa Parks and the creation of Martin Luther King's Montgomery Improvement Association sparked the interest of the media (Onion, Sullivan and Mullen).

Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, was published in 1953, and, even though the characters are fictional, it is very closely related to the author's autobiographical background. The novel recounts a black boy's ecstatic religious experience on the day of his fourteenth birthday. The protagonist, John Grimes, has many similarities with the author himself. Born and bred in Harlem, he is the stepson of a cold and abusive preacher, and is in charge of the care of his younger siblings. John is physically small and weak, but is gifted with a brilliant mind, and is starting to realize that he has homosexual orientations. In addition, he is tormented by questions about his religious beliefs and, in the final chapter of the book, sets off to become a preacher himself. All the characters including the protagonist and most of the events Baldwin describes take direct inspiration from his own experiences in life, and Harlem plays a major role in the plot (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 5-9; 42-53; 63-84).

2.2. Christianity and Darkness: Baldwin's Views on Religion, and the Critique of Stowe and Wright

A couple of years after the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin published his first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*. The first part of the collection is dedicated to literary criticism.

In *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin criticizes what he calls "protest novels." In the first articles of the collection, "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone," he takes as an example the world famous American novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe; he then applies the same reasoning to critique Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

Baldwin focuses on two aspects of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: firstly, he criticizes the book's starting moral assumptions and its motives; then he also questions its literary value, and through the process of questioning it, he questions the literary value of the entire genre of the "protest novel."

"[...]Uncle Tom's Cabin, then, is activated by what might be called a theological terror, the terror of damnation; and the spirit that breaths in this book, hot, self-righteous, fearful, is not different from that spirit of medieval times which sought to exorcise evil by burning witches; and is not different from that terror which activates a lynch mob.[...]" (*Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son* 14-15).

Baldwin argues that the motives that brought Stowe to write her novel come from a medieval concept of morality, which identifies the whites with divine grace and the blacks with the devil and sin. Baldwin felt strongly against the puritan dichotomy of Christianity: the dualist vision of heaven and hell, of sin and grace. In his view, which is stated from the first lines of the article, Christianity has been historically imposed on African Americans. The author affirms that in the religious frame of reference they have been given the role of sinners; opposed to the whites, who are identified as saved by the grace of God. This role was used to oppress them, while the promise of an afterlife justice and the fear of a heavenly punishment kept them from rising against the injustice they repeatedly suffered from in the slavery enforcing American society (Morrison 28-30).

Religion is one of the main focuses of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which is set for the most part in a storefront church. The novel consists of chapters titled after characters and their prayers, and within them are the thoughts and recollections they have while they pray.

We, therefore, witness different approaches to religion by different characters, representing the various aspects of religion Baldwin witnessed first-hand in his years of preaching during adolescence. John, the protagonist, represents the author's youthful doubts and his first vocation; Florence, John's aunt, portrays the practical, mundane approach veiled by her fear of death; Elizabeth, his mother, is depicted as the embodiment of the sinful shame African Americans have been taught to feel; and Gabriel, John's imposing stepfather, represents bigoted religious authority, but at the same time, he represents Baldwin's adult disillusionment with Christian beliefs.

The religious metaphors are ubiquitous in the book, but, despite the doubts and critiques present in the novel, the rejection of religion apparent in Baldwin's later works is not evident yet. Evident are the racial overtones in his view of Christianity.

"[...]For it had been the will of God that they should hear, and pass thereafter, one to another, the story of the Hebrew children who had been held in bondage in the land of Egypt; and how the Lord had heard their groaning, and how His heart was moved; and how He bid them wait but a little season till He should send deliverance. Florence's mother had known this story, so it seemed, from the day she was born. And while she lived – rising in the morning before the sun came up, standing and bending in the fields when the sun was high [...] she did not forget that deliverance was promised and would surely come[...]" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* 64-65).

In the passage above, Florence remembers, with a combination of scorn and reverence, her mother's unwavering faith, in the face of her enslaved condition. Here and in other passages, Baldwin clearly states his view of religion as a tool of oppression, disguised as a source of relief and hope. When freedom comes, it is delivered by the grace of God, by means of the northern white army. This idea pollutes the newly acquired freedom, and sets the premises for yet another unequal condition

in which black Americans, despite being free, are in debt and inferior to their white saviours.

This is the view Baldwin reprimands in his critique of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, stated in "Everybody's Protest Novel," when he asserts the moral superiority felt by white people, and, in the specific case, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, when approaching the themes of integration and of racial relationship. He also critiques Richard Wright for the same reason. In his best known novel, *Native Son*, Wright tells the story of a young African American, Bigger Thomas, who is caught in a brutal and destructive downward spiral and kills two women before being arrested and sentenced to death. Baldwin feels that Wright depicts a sinful monster inside Bigger Thomas's soul, waiting to burst out with violence. The representation of African Americans offered by the protagonist of Wright's masterpiece does not differ from the view exposed by Stowe's novel nearly a century before. Wright's novel, for Baldwin, is based on the same moral assumption held by Stowe, which assigns an innate tendency to sin to African American people.

For Baldwin, the message in *Native Son* is particularly hideous for its acceptance of a theology imposed on black people by the white society, which in fact denies their humanity. In the last page of "Everybody's Protest Novel," he writes:

"[...]For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth[...]" (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 18).

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the oppressive nature of religion is expressed on a dual level. The novel sheds light on the workings of Christian oppression in American society on the level of African American communities as well as that of individuals: various characters, such as John, represent situations closer to Baldwin's own sentiments and experiences with Christianity.

John's father, like the author's, is a preacher; John is therefore supposed to become a preacher himself, and is raised adhering to the teachings of the Bible. As a consequence, he is forced to grow up considering himself a sinner, and his rising homosexual eroticism a shameful sin. In the process of his upbringing, he has virtually no choice: he will inevitably either be a preacher or a sinner; both these possibilities are imposed on him, denying him the chance of establishing his own identity.

In the first chapter of the novel, the moment of the protagonist's discovery of his intelligence is described in these terms:

"[...]This was not, in John, a faith subject to death or alteration, nor yet a hope subject to destruction; it was his identity, and part, therefore, of that wickedness for which his father beat him and to which he clung in order to withstand his father.[...] And this is why, though he was born in the faith and had been surrounded all his life by the saints and by their prayers and their rejoicing[...] John's heart was hardened against the Lord[...]" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* 18-19).

John's longing for the material world, his love of the theatre, movies, books and knowledge are all considered sinful by his stepfather, who lives his religious life in an almost paranoid manner, dividing the world into the sinners and the saved, relegating virtually everyone except himself to the role of sinners, and imposing this apocalyptical view of the world on John. The protagonist is therefore tormented by the constant presence of a sense of guilt mixed with his desires that is well represented by his secretive trip to the cinema in the same chapter, by his stepfather's rebuttal of the educational excursions John's teacher offers him, and later in the visions he has in his trance (Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* 30-38; 187-199).

Moreover, from the very beginning, one of the only characters presented as moral in the novel is John's hateful, abusive stepfather. This moral authority is represented by his status as a holy man and as head deacon of his congregation. He is the most controversial and problematic figure in the book, but ultimately a very negative one. He represents the flaws in the simplistic dichotomy between moral and immoral that John struggles to understand when he asks his mother if his father is a

good man. Elizabeth's elusive answer is an implicit denial:

"[...] "Mama," John asked suddenly, "is Daddy a good man?" He had not known that he was going to ask the question, and he watched in astonishment as her mouth tightened and her eyes grew dark. "That ain't no kind of question," she said mildly. "You don't know no better man, do you?"[...]" (*Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain* 21-22).

But Baldwin's condemnation of religion is not total. The final chapter sees the protagonist fall in an ecstatic trance during a praying session. He dreams of an utmost darkness where he faces not the judgement of God but that of his stepfather, who represents John's shame for his sins and, at the same time, sin itself. Baldwin identifies in Gabriel the bigotry of an oppressive religion that tramples on the protagonist as an individual and on the entire black community in their search for an identity. Religious oppression is an integral part of the inequalities of American society that deny not only identity, but even the search of it to African Americans.

But John is saved from the darkness. In an uncalled ending, John seems to be saved by calling out for the help of God:

"[…] Then John saw the Lord – for a moment only; and the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear. Then, in a moment, he was set free; his tears sprang as from a fountain; his heart, like a fountain of water, burst. Then he cried: "Oh, blessed Jesus! Oh Lord Jesus! Take me through!"[…] he felt himself, out of the darkness, and the fire, and the terrors of death, rising upward to meet the saints[…]" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* 197-198).

In the confusion of his trance, the protagonist has somehow found a personal balance in his spirituality; he doesn't feel guilty for his sexuality anymore, despite what he has been taught. In an unexpectedly canonical ending, he finally accepts himself within his religion.

However, James Baldwin later in his life confessed, during a private interview with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Black Muslim, of thinking of himself as a non-religious person (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 327). The widening distance from Christianity is more explicit in his essays, while the subject of religion drops significantly in importance in his later novels.

The recurring theme of the need to escape from darkness in order to find one's identity was popular with other American writers before Baldwin; most notably, it can be seen in Ernest Hemingway's collection *In Our Time,* where vision and sight are crucial and the narration often rotates around the relationship between darkness and light (Benson 113). Other African American writers have also dealt with the theme of darkness. For example, the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* falls into a manhole and is forced to burn his belonging to defeat the darkness inside the sewers; moreover, he ends up living illegally in a basement and lights it up with 1369 lightbulbs (Ellison 7). Richard Wright also dealt with the topic, but expressed it in terms of blackness and whiteness. In Wright's *Native Son* whiteness stands for morality and purity, while blackness is synonym of wickedness, with clear racial connotations (Schlegel). Bigger Thomas, *Native Son's* protagonist, finally embraces his wickedness in the last lines of the novel:

"[…]I didn't want to kill!" Bigger shouted. "But what I killed for, I am![…] I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for'em[…]I feel all right when I look at it that way[…]" (Wright 429-430)

The *topos* of the escape from darkness is expressed in many of Baldwin's essays, and is an indispensable part of Baldwin's writing. It is central in the final climax of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. He also cites it in "Everybody's Protest Novel":

"[…]In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity – which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves – we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves.[…]" (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 13)

The inevitability of escaping is often paired with the assumption that only through pain one could reach for his truest self and with an egotistical opinion that a more acute awareness of one's self could only be reached by those who suffer most, as noted in the article, "The Unsparing Confessions of *Giovanni's Room*" (Toibin). The view, although fascinating, has been regarded as echoing from romanticism, and has been considered to be too simplistic and anachronistic by many critics over the years. What critics believed is part of the reason for the dismissal of Baldwin's works as irrelevant during the 1970s and 1980s. Baldwin's second Novel, *Giovanni's Room*, received similar evaluations, and was attacked also for its controversial theme of homosexual love (Grandt 271-274).

2.3. Racial Relationships and Contradictions

One other main theme in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is constituted by the racial relationships, or more specifically, the conditions in which the African American families in the Harlem ghetto were living. The subject, although never addressed directly, is a constant presence in the novel, as the lives experienced by the characters are greatly influenced by their social conditions.

The indirect approach to the topic of race is revealed to be programmatic by Baldwin's statements in the collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, especially in the article "Many Thousands Gone." In the collection and in various other interviews and essays, Baldwin stresses the need for the artist to truly represent the human experience and the impossibility to write convincingly about anything not derived from one's own experiences. Baldwin reaffirms this principle by critiquing Wright's embrace of the "negro stereotypes," which had the double flaw of further exacerbating the interracial conflict rather than resolving it, and of being artistically dishonest, by not being representative of human experience.

The summa of these concepts brought Baldwin to one of the most striking contradictions of his career: his first novel touches on the subject of racial issues, and his early nonfiction deals mostly with the same matter. The popularity of his first books, and his willingness to talk about race in interviews, made him the favorite interlocutor for the American media of the time on the subject. At the same time, he felt that discussing the topic of race in public would relegate him to a political position, and could compromise his status as an artist.

As Michael Anderson argues, he became, more or less willingly, a bridge between the African American community and the white audience; and yet the "negro writer" he sought not to be, by exiling himself in France (Anderson 13).

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the social division is on the background of every event, and it is symbolically present throughout the entire novel. Among its most crude representations are the death of John's biological father, Richard, who kills himself after his efforts for an intellectual enfranchisement are nullified by a racial prejudice that sends him to jail for a crime he has not committed; and the stabbing of Roy, John's younger brother, during an interracial altercation, which is also the pivotal point of "The Rockpile," a short story contained in the collection *Going to Meet the Man* (Baldwin, Going To Meet the Man 761-770).

Less violent but still crippling racist conditions are symbolized by John's run in Central Park, where an invisible barrier divides Harlem from the Upper East Side and The Fifth Avenue, past which John immediately feels exposed and out of place, and by John's feeling of awe and non-belonging in the presence of the National Library.

In his essay Baldwin also affirms that the stereotyped "Negro" invented by white people has become an undeniable element for black people to deal with. African Americans, in their search for communitarian as well as personal identities,

necessarily have to question the society they live in, and relate themselves to white people. In order to do it, they first have to face this stereotype, overcome it, and partially embrace it.

This view finds direct confirmation in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, when John is too scared to speak the answer to the question posed him by his school's dean even though he knows it. John's sense of insecurity comes, amongst other factors, from the stereotyped image of black people being less intelligent than white people, and John keeps the opinion of white people in higher respect than that of black people when they do appreciate his brilliance.

"[…]It was not only colored people who praised John, since they could not, John felt, in any case really know; but white people also said it, in fact had said it first and said it still.[…]" (Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 17).

The idea of white people as depository of culture and intelligence is also displayed by Richard's revengeful attempt to accumulate knowledge. The character feels that knowledge could give him a chance at equality; but he is proven wrong, when, lined up with other black people for an investigation, his words go unheard and he is unjustly incarcerated.

"[…] "Little-bit, I don't know so much." Then he said, with a change in his face and voice which she had grown to know: "I just decided me one day that I was going to get to know everything them white bastards knew, and I was going to get to know it better than them, so could no white son-of-a-bitch *nowhere* never talk *me* down, and never make me feel like I was dirt, when I could read him the alphabet, back, front, and sideways. Shit – he weren't going to beat my ass, then. And if he tried to kill me, I'd take him with me, I swear to my mother I would."[…]" (Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 161).

2.4. The Grimes Family

Baldwin's depiction of Richard, the father John never met, strikes a vivid contrast with his depiction of Gabriel. Richard is an atheist to the point of blasphemy, and represents the attempt to reach for equality and self-realization through strenuous self-education. Meanwhile, Gabriel stands for a bigoted, almost paranoid, religious view of opposition between himself and the rest of the world. The contrast between the two father-figures is also relevant in terms of the racial problem. Their differing fates seem to portray the only options available for the young protagonist facing his future in America: Richard's attempt to find a place is frustrated by an iniquitous society that drives him first to jail and then to death; on the other hand, Gabriel finds his place inside the black community, which Baldwin refers to as "the congregation of the saints," but this does not make his life less miserable. However, Richard's death is not surprising, since the readers already know he is no longer with Elisabeth and John, but how it arrives is hardly believable and too sudden. It raises the question of why his death was necessary for the plot, and why it had to come that way. The relevance to the story is not clear, since John, the supposed protagonist, does not know of Richard's existence and experience. His presence is relevant only for the reader.

On the other hand, Gabriel is the most relevant figure in the novel, probably even more than John. His relationship with John is at the basis of the doubts that send him on his quest for self-discovery. John's path is defined by his hatred of Gabriel. The protagonist's view of himself derives directly from his father's words, and the goals he sets for himself in life are their consequence, as we can see in the first chapter:

"[…]In this world, John, who was, his father said, ugly, who was always the smallest boy in his class, and who had no friends, became immediately beautiful, tall and popular. People fell all over themselves, to meet John Grimes. He was a poet, or a college president, or a movie star; he drank expensive whiskey, and he smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes in the green package[…]He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed[…]" (Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 17-18).

Gabriel is regarded as his ultimate nemesis by the protagonist, and it is his judgment John faces in the darkness before he can free himself from his religious constraints and find his own identity.

Gabriel is central to the narration of every chapter of the novel, even to the ones about other characters recollections, in which John hardly appears. It is around Gabriel that everything takes place, and he is the most powerful character in the story. His is the authority that everyone else has to face or challenge. The lives of all characters are presented in relation to him: Florence, Elisabeth, Deborah (Gabriel's dead first wife), Esther (with whom Gabriel had an affair and the mother of his firstborn), Roy, and obviously John. The rebellion to a father (or father-like) figure is a *topos* of the coming of age novel, but, in the story, such rebellion does not actually happen. John never stands against his father (which Roy does): the battle takes place in John's mind.

In the novel's ending, John seems to comply with his father's views and morals, by announcing his will to become a preacher himself, even if it happens out of scorn for Gabriel.

Moreover, in the very closing lines of the novel, John is asked by his mother if he is ready to go back inside the house:

"[…]"You better come upstairs," she said, still smiling,[…] to escape her eyes, he kissed her, saying "Yes, Mama. I'm coming."[…] And he felt his father behind him. And felt the March wind rise, striking through his damp clothes, against his salty body. He turned to face his father – he found himself smiling, but his father did not smile. They looked at each other for a moment. His mother stood in the doorway, in the long shadow of the hall. "I'm ready," John said, "I'm coming. I'm on my way."" (Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 214-215).

2.5. A Formal Ending

The final chapter is highly symbolic. In the last pages, a comparison is suggested between Jesus and John the Baptist on one side, and John Grimes and Elisha on the other:

"[…] "And you see the way the Lord worked with young Elisha there?" said Praying Mother Washington, with a calm, sweet smile. "He had that boy down there on the floor a-prophesying in tongues, amen, just the very minute before Johnny fell out a-screaming, and a-crying before the Lord. Look like the Lord was using Elisha to say: 'It's time, boy, come on home.'"[…]" (Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 202).

Moreover, the final image of the Grimes' family house evokes religious overtones: John has just turned fourteen, and it is no coincidence that chapter 14 in the gospel of Saint John is known as the "Father's house verses":

"[…][2]In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. [3]And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. […]" (Authorized King James Version 610)

In the words of John's gospel, Jesus prophesies that he will precede in heaven (the Father's house) those who believe in him, and intercedes for them with God. The comparison with Jesus seems to indicate that the protagonist found his balance in religion and is accepted in his father's house.

At the same time, the ending is stylistically formal. John faces the rising sun and smiles at an unknown future, having found his place in society, while Gabriel stands silent behind him.

The final scene seems to be suggesting a sense of resolution, a canonical happy ending that comes unexpected. The Grimes family members appear reunited in front of the house door, while the tensions between them remain lingering. The reader is

left uncertain about what the future holds for the protagonist, and confused by the apparently optimistic image of the gaze into the rising sun.

The shadow of Baldwin's own stepfather is cast ominously on the entire novel and on most of his early production. He is famously quoted saying: "'Mountain' is the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else, I had to deal with what hurt me most. I had to deal, above all, with my father. He was my model; I learned a lot from him. Nobody's ever frightened me since." (Bennets 17)

The other parental figure in the novel, John's mother, does not come out as a positive character either. Despite expressions of mutual love between her and John, Baldwin subtly critiques her silent acceptance of her condition and of Gabriel's abusive behavior, due to a shameful vision of herself she projects on John as well. Elizabeth's accusation is a reflection of Baldwin's views of his own mother, when, in his introduction to the collection *Notes of a Native Son*, he hints at her "exasperating and mysterious habit of having babies" (Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son 5).

Lastly, in the first chapter of the second part of the novel, the focus of the narration shifts on Florence, John's aunt. She abandoned her family in the South, in order to pursue personal fulfillment in New York City. The better life she hoped for in the North is, however, denied by the social inequalities of the ghetto. Florence's story is representative of one of the defining moments of American history: the mass migration of thousands of African Americans to northern states at the beginning of the 20th Century, also known as the Great Migration (Wilkerson). But Florence's flight from her duties toward her dying mother can also be read on a more intimate level, as it echoes Baldwin's guilt-coated escape to France, in his attempt to realize his career away from the family he had to provide for after the death of his stepfather.

3. Conclusions

From the analysis, it seems like *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is true to the literary views Baldwin expressed in his early literary criticism. In the novel, he talks about race because it is the reality his characters face, more or less prominently, in their daily lives; and he does so because he grew up in an environment pervaded by racial injustice. In Baldwin's views, the artist "[…]writes out of one thing only – one's own experience." (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* 8)

It is, therefore, inevitable for him to touch on the subject of race. Nevertheless, he refuses to linger on it and make it the focus of the story, but implements it in the landscape of the human experiences he wants to represent through his characters. However, Baldwin's attempt to represent a believable human experience is flawed by his wide use of symbolism and by his attempt at a formal ending. The widespread symbols, which are a legacy of the religious themes, are affecting the credibility of the characters, which become stereotypical in their representations of biblical counterparts. Baldwin's division between the street and the church and his representation of some of the characters seem to be too simplistic and too close to the stereotypical views of African Americans even though the author himself may not have been aware of it. Therefore, to some extent, he falls in the same trap he accused Wright of falling for. How and why does Baldwin fall in the use of stereotypes? The answer has to be searched in the sociopolitical forces at work behind Baldwin's writing, as much as the literary influences on his styles.

Nevertheless, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin displays a superb ability in treating historical moments, widespread social injustices and racism, while depicting the personal story of a young boy and his family. His talent in balancing the social background and the intimate experience is an undeniable part of the reasons behind the success of his first novel.

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